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SOME CURRENT BELIEFS IN THE LIGHT OF HERACLEITUS'S DOCTRINE.

THE "sage" of Ephesus "flourished," we are told, in the sixty-ninth Olympiad, five hundred years before Christ. But the fallacies he then attacked are still commonly held and taught; for his argument is seldom studied and little understood. Heracleitus himself was oppressed with a sense of the novelty of his teaching, and by the difficulty of rendering it in terms of speech and thought then current. His message, therefore, is set in metaphor, and needs reinterpretation for each succeeding age; so that men still come upon his meaning as upon hidden gold.

"Uttering things solemn and unadorned, he reaches over a thousand years with his voice, because of the god in him."

A. Let us first consider his attitude towards materialism. Just as we say that energy and even the amount of energy persist, while kinetic energy becomes potential, and potential energy becomes kinetic; so Anaximenes had taught that something he called ether persists, while it is alternately condensed and rarefied, to form all the phenomena of life. Heracleitus argues that we can not find anything which thus persists.

"All things change; nothing abides."

The life of one thing is the death of another. Of that

energy which is said to persist unchanged in amount, no account can be given, nor can any reason be advanced for supposing that there is such a "something, I know not what." As Mach has said, all that we know is that in many cases kinetic energy which has been expended, or potential energy that has ceased to exist, may be *recovered*;—as where a ball is thrown into the air, where rain is lifted to the mountain tops, where chemical elements or magnetized particles are sundered, where heat and mechanical energy are converted into electrical "stress," and *vice versa*. It is mere metaphor to say that the energy *persists*, for we can not assign to energy any meaning which is common to kinetic and to potential energy, except the *possibility* of reversing the change. In other words it is not the *thing*, energy, but the *order*, the law of reversibility, which persists.

Therefore, from the never ending flux of things, Heraclitus directs our attention to the order, which he conceives to be "the same in all things"; which "no one of gods or men has made."

B. But his argument is fatal to a view that has been adopted by a large part of the Christian Church, that this unchanging order is one day to take the place of the present flux and strife of opposites in the world we know. The order exists now in the strife and must be found there. A world of peace is a world of death.

"Homer was wrong in saying 'would that strife might perish from among gods and men!' He did not know that he was praying for the destruction of the universe; for if his prayer were heard all things would pass away." "War is the father of all and the king of all."

C. A view still more popular among us receives from Heraclitus some deadly blows. Evolution and progress

and betterment seem to many essential, if the world is to have meaning. Heracleitus shows that for the universe, at least, progress is a superficial aspect. For every movement and development seems to await a day of reversal,—of degeneration. The law of compensation is world-wide. Movement is not continuous in any direction, but oscillates around some fixed measure. The life of man and of the earth, the solar system and the bi-polar drift of the stars seem to await a day when their present tendencies will be reversed. And if this is so, then how superficial is that progress which, after all, is but an approach to the day when the return movement will begin.

And it must be noted that all progress implies a standard of preference. But, “for the gods,” all things that are, are good, and all standards of preference are based upon the partial outlook of the individual.

“Men themselves have made a law unto themselves, not knowing what they made it about; but the gods have ordered the nature of all things. Now the arrangements which men have made are never constant, neither when they are right nor when they are wrong; but all the arrangements which the gods have made are always right, both when they are right and when they are wrong. So great is the difference.”

D. But the pessimism which a late tradition has assigned him receives in fact from Heracleitus a splendid refutation. All the negations we have thus far considered,—of fixity in things, of an ultimate peace, of genuine progress, refer, he says, in the nature of the case, to a restricted point of view, which unfortunately has always prevailed among men. Ignorance and passion confine us each one in a world of our own, which is related to the real world, the common world, much as the land of dreams is related to that world of waking life, which all men in

some measure share. The wise man alone is fully awake, and, looking at the world without prejudice, he sees, not merely a world of good and evil, and a constant flux of particular things, but rather a single, splendid, flaming life, "an everliving fire," in which fixed, eternal measures prevail.

To him the strife of the world is not mere confusion, but the opposition of forces which, through their tension, stretch the chords of life to an infinite variety of tones. These, when touched by the spirit of contemplation, sound to the ear of wisdom like a harmony of unequaled beauty.

The path towards wisdom would seem, then, to be defined in a comparatively simple fashion. To know the life of the world man must cherish in himself, also, a similar life, not hoping to attain the passionless light of the gods, but preserving in his soul the balance appropriate to it, between the control of reason and the satisfaction of desire. He will participate in the conflicts of life, and enter fully into their zest and glory. But he will look for his real satisfaction, not in the outcome of the conflict, but in the perception of the nature of the conflict. Thus the politician, while contending valiantly, will have every minute his prize and pleasure, in noting throughout the strife the operation of the laws of political life, of party government, and of human nature. Wisdom, therefore, is to be viewed not so much as an accumulation, but as insight, momentarily renewed. Thus the wise man is ever poor,—“in spirit,”—for his wealth never stays with him, but comes and goes each instant. He ever hungers and thirsts for righteousness, and is ever filled. In this way his *is* the kingdom of heaven.

This I take to be the teaching of Heracleitus.

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